

Kraków: Monday January 20, 2014

Pope Francis and the Call to Unity

Pope Francis has said very little about ecumenism in the first ten months as bishop of Rome. Does this mean this will be a short talk? Probably not, because while Francis has not made important pronouncements on ecumenism, many things about his ministry as pope have big ecumenical significance.

Pope Francis has already met several major leaders from other Churches, whom he has greeted as a brother bishop. The most important was Patriarch Bartholomew, who was the first Patriarch of Constantinople to take part in the installation of a Bishop of Rome - maybe ever, but certainly since the division of 1054. He came because on the evening of his election, Francis presented himself on the balcony of St Peter's not as Pope of the universal church, but as bishop of Rome. Then Francis met Patriarch Bartholomew in Jerusalem, when they prayed together in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre and had further meetings. There is an evident warmth between them. Now it has been announced that Francis will visit the Patriarch in Istanbul for the Feast of St. Andrew in November.

During a 4-day visit to Rome of Tawadros II, Coptic Patriarch of Egypt, in May, the Patriarch stayed at the Casa Sancta Martha where Pope Francis lives. At his Mass on the Patriarch's first day, Francis shared his joy: "Today", he said, "there's a good reason for joy in this house", where we are hosting "the Pope of Alexandria, the Patriarch of the See of St Mark. ... He is a brother who comes to visit the Church of Rome to talk, to make a journey together. He is a brother bishop, ... a bishop like me, and he carries his Church forward. Let us ask the Lord to bless him and help him in his ministry to carry forward the Coptic Church; and for us too, because we know that we walk together on this journey". Pope Francis is always using this image of walking together: with his fellow bishops, with priests, with lay people, and here with the leader of another Church.

Pope Francis has already had two very friendly meetings with the new Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby. They are working on some practical projects together - like human trafficking.

By his gestures, his evident humility and his simple teaching, Pope Francis quickly attracted the attention of other Christians. Many of the things that Protestants instinctively react against concerning the papacy and the Vatican are not there with Francis. In fact, he often speaks against these things: clericalism, careerism and ambition, pomp, legalism, centralization. So he is attracting attention among Evangelicals and Pentecostals. It is in this area that there have been some startling developments of which you will have heard something already - the video to the Kenneth Copeland conference, etc. I will return to this at the end of the talk.

Let's look more closely at some of these elements in the teaching of Francis that are most significant for Christian unity.

1. Total Christ-centredness.

At his meeting with the new movements on the eve of Pentecost last May, Francis answered questions put to him. One question was: "How can we communicate faith effectively today?" This was his reply: "I shall answer with just three words. The first: Jesus. What is the most important thing? Jesus. If we forge ahead with our own arrangements, with other things, with beautiful things but without Jesus we make no headway, it does not work. Jesus is more important. I would like now to make a small

complaint, but in a brotherly way, just between ourselves. All of you in the square shouted “Francis, Francis, Pope Francis”; but where was Jesus? I should have preferred to hear you cry: “Jesus, Jesus is Lord, and he is in our midst!” From now on enough of “Francis”, just “Jesus”!

The message of Francis has an evangelical simplicity, as in this weekday Mass reflection: “How can we bear witness? Contemplate Jesus. How can we forgive? Contemplate Jesus suffering. How can we not hate our neighbour? Contemplate Jesus suffering. How can we avoid gossiping about our neighbour? Contemplate Jesus suffering. There is no other way”.¹ Very practical, accessible to all, but always he sends the hearers back to Jesus himself.

Francis has spoken of Christians without Christ. One category is those “who seek out only devotions, but no Jesus. There is something missing, my brother! Jesus is missing. If your devotions lead you to Jesus, then they are good. But if they leave you where you are, then something is wrong.”²

This centredness on Jesus is central for ecumenism, because all Christians are united in confessing Jesus as the Word made flesh, Son of God and Son of man, “who was put to death for our trespasses and raised for our justification.” (Rom. 4: 25).

2. The Word of God

To be focused on Jesus, we must be rooted in the Scriptures, especially the Gospels. What does it mean to guard the Word of God? It means “opening our hearts” to the Word, “as the earth opens to the seed”³.

Francis mentioned a second category of Christians without Christ. This may surprise us: “There is another group of “Christians without Christ: those who seek out novelties, special things, they seek out private revelations”, though revelation was fulfilled with the New Testament. The Holy Father warned these Christians against the desire to go “to some kind of revelation spectacle, to feel new things. Take up the Bible instead!”⁴

Just last week, Francis was preaching on the episode in 1 Samuel where the scandalous behaviour of Eli’s sons leads to Israel’s defeat and the capture of the Ark. “The Word of God in those scandals is rare; in those men and in those women the Word of God was rare! They did not have a bond with God! They had a position in the Church, a position of power, also of comfort. But the Word of God, no!”⁵

¹ Biblical Meditation at Mass, September 12, 2013.

² Biblical Meditation at Mass, September 7, 2013.

³ Biblical Meditation at Mass, June 8, 2013.

⁴ Biblical Meditation, September 7, 2013.

⁵ Biblical Meditation, January 16, 2014.

3. The Call to Conversion

The Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, issued in December, is like the mission statement of Pope Francis. In it he speaks of the “ecclesial conversion” to which we were called by the Second Vatican Council, which “presented ecclesial conversion as openness to a constant self-renewal born of fidelity to Jesus Christ: “every renewal of the Church essentially consists in an increase of fidelity to her own calling ... Christ summons the Church as she goes on her pilgrim way ... to that continual reformation of which she always has need, insofar as she is a human institution here on earth.” (EG, 26). Here Francis is quoting from the Decree on Ecumenism, para. 6, which makes clear that authentic renewal and ecumenism are inseparable.

In the next para. *Unitatis Reconciliatio* teaches that all true ecumenism is based on conversion of heart, on all Christians and Christian communities becoming more like Jesus: “There can be no ecumenism worthy of the name without interior conversion.” (UR, para. 7). In para. 8 the bishops describe this teaching as “spiritual ecumenism”, which they regard as “the soul of the whole ecumenical movement.”

These three paragraphs, central to the Decree on Ecumenism, were an acceptance and endorsement of the teaching of the French ecumenical pioneer, the Abbé Paul Couturier from Lyon (1881 - 1953), the first to adopt the phrase “spiritual ecumenism”. Couturier had taught much about centredness on Jesus, on humility, on emulation of the best in the others, on the need to confess our sins against unity.

So in the call of Pope Francis for ecclesial conversion, we can see: (1) his identification of church renewal with conversion; (2) that conversion means conformity to the teaching and the ways of Jesus; (3) a recall to spiritual ecumenism (as we shall see he fills this out with his teaching on the Holy Spirit).

4. Authority and Ministry as Service

This conversion to Jesus means that authority and ministry are understood wholly in terms of **service**. Our example is Jesus “who came not to be served, but to serve.”

In his letter to the new Cardinals recently named, Francis wrote: “The Cardinalate does not signify a promotion, or an honor, or a decoration. It is simply a service that calls for enlarging one’s vision and widening one’s heart.”

In a homily last June, Pope Francis spoke about roles in the Church “No one is secondary. No one is the most important in the Church; we are all equal in God’s eyes.”⁶ When we understand that the Holy Spirit is given to all Christians, we can all be filled with the Holy Spirit, and indwelt by the Holy Spirit, we realize that there is no greater gift of God than the Holy Spirit. Yes, the ordained ministers are set apart for a distinct calling, but there is a foundational equality grounded in baptism.

This rejection of clericalism tears down many barriers to Christian unity. This humility is needed for every step on the ecumenical journey. The history of our divisions is a history of arrogance and the assertion of power.

5. A Church that goes out

⁶ Biblical Meditation, June 26, 2013.

Francis has often contrasted a self-enclosed church that he calls “self-referential” to the Church he wants to see, the Church that goes out. writes: “I hope that all communities will devote the necessary effort to advancing along the path of a pastoral and missionary conversion which cannot leave things as they presently are.” (EG, 25).

The Church that goes out does so in love. Francis says we need to imitate the Good Shepherd “who seeks not to judge but to love.” (EG, 125).

The Church that goes out has to go to the extremities, to the margins, to the peripheries. Pope Francis is speaking especially of going out to the poor, to the disadvantaged, to the suffering. But I think this also has application to the Christian extremities. In the Christian context, this going out can mean beyond our usual ecumenical partners to all the free churches, to Pentecostals, to new charismatic churches, to Messianic Jews. This is in fact what Pope Francis did in Buenos Aires as archbishop.

6. Openness to the Holy Spirit

“Are we open to “God’s surprises”? Or are we closed and fearful before the newness of the Holy Spirit? ... Do we have the courage to strike out along the new paths which God’s newness sets before us, or do we resist, barricaded in transient structures which have lost their capacity for openness to what is new?”⁷

This openness to the Holy Spirit is fundamental for ecumenism. For the road towards full unity is a road never travelled before. Our expertise as scholars, as leaders, as intercessors, will contribute nothing unless it is led and shaped by the Holy Spirit. The Decree on Ecumenism had ended with these words:

This holy council firmly hopes that the initiatives of the sons and daughters of the Catholic Church, joined with those of their separated brothers and sisters, will go forward, without obstructing the ways of divine providence, and without prejudging the future inspirations of the Holy Spirit. Further, this council declares that it realizes that this holy objective - the reconciliation of all Christians in the unity of the one and only church of Christ - transcends human powers and gifts. It therefore places its hope entirely in the prayer of Christ for the church, in the love of the Father for us, and in the power of the Holy Spirit.” (UR, 24).

Trust in the Holy Spirit rejects all fears, including the fear of making mistakes. Francis has made clear that he prefers an accident-prone Church that makes mistakes to a Church that stays inside, remains safe and does not go out on the streets.

7. Diversity

Francis has an amazing paragraph in EG on “eternal newness” (para. 11). He cites St Irenaeus: “By his coming, Christ brought with him all newness.” He ends this para. By writing: “Whenever we make the effort to return to the source and to recover the original freshness of the gospel, new avenues arise, new paths of creativity open up, with different forms of expression, more eloquent signs and words with new meaning for today’s world. Every form of authentic evangelization is always ‘New.’” This citation introduces an important ecumenical issue: the place of diversity and the issue of unity in diversity.

⁷ Homily at Pentecost, May 19, 2013.

At a Mass celebrated with the Cardinals immediately after his election, Pope Francis said: “The Paraclete creates all the differences among the Churches, almost as if he were an Apostle of Babel. But on the other hand, it is he who creates unity from these differences, not in “equality”, but in harmony.”

In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Francis addresses the issue of diversity in several contexts. In a section on evangelization in different cultural situations: “We cannot demand that peoples of every continent, in expressing their Christian faith, imitate modes of expression which European nations developed at a particular moment of their history, because the faith cannot be constricted to the limits of understanding and expression of any one culture.” (EG, 118). Diversity of cultures calls for diversity of expressions of faith.

In a section on “Charisms at the service of a communion which evangelizes”, he writes of the diversity we experience all the time in our communities and between them, “Differences between persons and communities can sometimes prove uncomfortable, but the Holy Spirit, who is **the source of that diversity**, can bring forth something good from all things and turn it into an attractive means of evangelization. Diversity must always be reconciled by the help of the Holy Spirit; he alone can raise up diversity, plurality and multiplicity while at the same time bringing about unity. When we, for our part, aspire to diversity, we become self-enclosed, exclusive and divisive; similarly, whenever we attempt to create unity on the basis of our human calculations, we end up imposing a monolithic uniformity.” (EG, 131). Francis is saying that all Christian diversity comes from the Holy Spirit, not just some diversity! If others seek to follow Jesus in a different way from us, that difference expresses something of the Holy Spirit, because it comes from the desire to follow Jesus. What does not come from the Holy Spirit is a spirit of opposition, of scorn, of hatred. So an essential element in the renewal of the Church and what Francis calls “ecclesial conversion” is being purified from all confusion of unity with uniformity.

In a section headed “The Common Good and Peace in Society”, sub-heading “Unity prevails over Conflict”, Francis speaks particularly about diversity between nations: “The message of peace is not about a negotiated settlement but rather the conviction that the unity brought by the Spirit can harmonize every diversity. It overcomes every conflict by creating a new and promising synthesis. Diversity is a beautiful thing when it can constantly enter into a process of reconciliation and seal a sort of cultural covenant resulting in a ‘reconciled diversity’.” (EG, para. 230).

It may be ecumenically significant that Francis uses this phrase “reconciled diversity”. Over the last 40 years, there has been a divergence between the vision of the Catholic Church for Christian unity, and the vision of the mainline Protestant Churches. In 1973, an agreement was reached by the Lutheran and Reformed Churches of Europe, named after the place in Switzerland where they met. In the Leuenberg Agreement the term “reconciled diversity” was used to express their vision for a reunited church. Catholic ecumenical leaders criticized this terminology because it seemed to be settling for too little: establishing positive relations without dealing with all the oppositions. Francis’s use of this phrase may herald new ecumenical patterns for the Catholic Church. But he would insist on deep reconciliation, not just a form of mutual acceptance that isn’t much more than mutual toleration. The whole style of Pope Francis suggests that he sees walking and working together as the way that God effects reconciliation. Expect much more active collaboration with other Christians across the board: new evangelization, concern for the poor and marginalized, Christian formation, worship and prayer. “If we concentrate on the convictions we share, and if we keep in mind the principle of the hierarchy of truths, we

will be able to progress decidedly towards common expressions of proclamation, service and witness.” (EG, 246).

8. Ecumenical Dialogue as Exchange of Gifts

John Paul II made several creative contributions to ecumenism in UUS. One was his statement about dialogue: “Dialogue is not simply an exchange of ideas. In some way it is always an ‘exchange of gifts’.” (UUS, 28). This was in fact making more explicit what was taught in *Lumen Gentium*, para. 13 about all gifts being for the benefit of the whole body, citing 1 Peter 4: 10. Francis has developed this point in his own way: “How many important things unite us! If we really believe in the abundantly free working of the Holy Spirit. We can learn so much from one another! It is not just about being better informed about others, but rather about reaping what the Holy Spirit has sown in them, which is also meant to be a gift for us.” (EG, para. 246).

9. Synodality, Collegiality and Decentralization

It seems clear that one reason for the choice of Cardinal Bergoglio was the desire of many Cardinals that the teaching of Vatican Two on primacy and collegiality should be more fully implemented. He writes in EG: “The Second Vatican Council stated that, like the ancient patriarchal Churches, episcopal conferences are in a position to ‘contribute in many and fruitful ways to the concrete realization of the collegial spirit’. Yet this desire has not been fully realized ... Excessive centralization, rather than proving helpful, complicates the Church’s life and her missionary outreach.” (EG, 32).

Pope Francis sees the synod of bishops as a major instrument for this cooperation of the bishops of the world with the bishop of Rome. He has referred to his own participation in past synods, and spoken of his intentions concerning this institution, which, he says, “has been *permanently* placed at the service of the mission and communion of the Church as an expression of collegiality.”⁸ “To confirm in unity: the Synod of Bishops, in harmony with the primate. Let us go forward on the path of synodality, and grow in harmony with the service of the primacy.”⁹

Following John Paul II in *Ut Unum Sint*, paras. 90 - 95, Francis recognizes the need for “a conversion of the papacy.”¹⁰ Some have expressed the fear that greater collegiality and decentralization will weaken the papacy, but Francis has said that the papal ministry will be strengthened.

10. Centrality of Relationships

⁸ Address to the Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops, June 19, 2013. Italics inserted by the author.

⁹ Mass on Feast of Saints Peter and Paul, with bestowal of the pallium on newly-appointed archbishops, June 29, 2013.

¹⁰ EG, 32, referring to John Paul II, *Ut Unum Sint*, 95.

Friendship, trust. Importance of friendships for unity: first example the friendship of Abbé Portal, a pioneer ecumenist in France and Lord Halifax, a leading Anglican layman in England. They had both gone to Madeira for several months in 1890 for health reasons; they became strong friends, and this bore ecumenical fruit thirty years later. A second example is the friendship of Archbishop Angelo Roncalli, a papal diplomat, and Dom Lambert Beauduin, a Belgian Benedictine, who met during a Roman thunderstorm in 1922, when they both took refuge in the same church porch. They remained in touch. When Archbishop, by then Cardinal, Roncalli was elected Pope in 1958 as John XXIII, Beauduin was very old and confined to bed. But he said of his friend, "He will call a council."

All through the ecumenical movement, friendships across church boundaries are very important. It is where attitudes change most. Your friendships with other Christians are an important part of your work for Christian unity. It is an approach totally in line with the message of Pope Francis.